



Representative Mike Cooper



1997 Session Report

Summer 1997

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

Thank you for the privilege of serving as your state representative.

The 1997 Legislature began its work at a fast pace in January and came to a dramatic conclusion in late April, when a strong spirit of bipartisanship enabled us to adjourn on time for the first time in forty years.

Democrats and Republicans worked together to craft a responsible state budget — one that, with the most recent economic forecast, falls about \$150 million below the spending limit established by Initiative 601. We also passed legislation that will help improve our public schools, make our streets safer, protect our natural resources, and provide a safety net for the less fortunate.

Still, I'm disappointed we weren't able to do more for hardworking families in our district. The Legislature fell short in its efforts to provide meaningful property tax relief for homeowners; make health care insurance more accessible; reduce classroom sizes; expand job opportunities; and solve our region's transportation problems.

This newsletter summarizes some of the key issues we dealt with during the session. As always, I encourage you to contact me with your questions, opinions, and suggestions for how I can serve you better. Again, many thanks!

Sincerely,

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State Representative

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Education is our number one priority

I'm proud to represent a district that values a first-rate public school system. During the 1997 session, I supported staying the course on school improvement, local control, and a stable source of funding, including the levy process. This session saw good, bad, and ugly approaches to education policy.

The ugly: I did not support the first budget proposal that went to the Governor's desk. It cut \$29 million in student learning grants; eliminated the proven \$2.9 million school-to-work program; and abolished successful programs like magnet schools and complex needs that serve "at-risk" students, students with disabilities, and non-English speaking students. In addition, the first budget also prohibited Washington from accepting \$16 million in federal Goals 2000 grants, which is our own tax money coming back to us for school improvement with no strings attached.

The good: Fortunately, this budget was vetoed by the governor because it was damaging to education. Negotiations between the governor and the Legislature resulted in restoring almost all the complex needs money, and an additional \$11 million in improvement grants. The governor vetoed the Goals 2000 language, thereby reinstating the \$16 million.

The bad: We were unable to save the highly-successful school-to-work program, and education funding still fails to keep up with inflation. The state currently funds roughly 78 percent of basic education costs, while the constitution mandates us to make "ample provision" for the education of all children.

We made some good changes in levy laws

The Legislature changed the levy laws, allowing school districts to ask voters for four-year levies rather than the current maximum of two years. This will allow local districts to do long range planning and give more stability to local programs. This legislation will require a constitutional change and voter approval in

November. I also supported a bill to re-instate an additional 4 percent to the levy lid. This passed and was signed into law by Governor Locke.

Protecting the environment — for now and the future

Last session we spent a lot of time protecting the state's environment from special-interests and bad legislation. I would have preferred to spend our time finding solutions to pressing problems such as water, clean air, growth and dwindling salmon stocks, which will likely bring federal intervention if they are declared an endangered species.

Minor changes made to GMA

A small group of lawmakers rigidly insisted on making radical changes to the Growth Management Act (GMA), which prevented many common-sense improvements recommended by the Land Use Study Commission from becoming law in 1997. Senate Bill 6094 was passed permitting counties to develop alternative methods of achieving goals without agreement from cities; changing wetland policy without sufficient discussion; and reducing weakening the powers of the Boards. Ironically, in vetoing 13 sections to SB 6094, Gov. Locke was able to sign legislation implementing a handful of Commission recommendations into law, including:

- Providing greater deference to local land use decisions;
- Increasing opportunity for economic development in rural areas;
- Improving public participation in the process; and
- Limiting and clarifying the power of growth management hearings boards.

Hazardous substances: You'd think there would be unanimous agreement to use alternatives to hazardous products, but that wasn't the case this year. HB 1601, which I opposed, would have banned government from giving information to people about alternatives to toxic products, such as letting them

1997 Session Report



know that you can use beer to kill slugs instead of store-bought, toxic slug bait. This bill died in the Senate.

Offshore drilling ban: After a few years of debate over this issue, we finally passed a permanent ban on oil and gas exploration and drilling off Washington's coasts. I'm proud to have co-sponsored this legislation which Governor Locke signed into law on April 23. It imposes

a permanent ban on oil and gas exploration and drilling off Washington's coast. We can't afford the risk of major spills on our coastline.

Office of Marine Safety: I sponsored legislation that would have kept the Office of Marine Safety — the agency that works at prevention and clean up of oil spills in Washington marine waters— as an independent agency within state government rather than being merged into the Department of Ecology (DOE). This bill was supported by the fishing and shellfish industry, the tribes, most conservation groups and county governments, but did not fit in with the Governor's plans for the agency.

In the end, I proposed a compromise that was accepted making marine safety a separate division within DOE, protecting its budget, and forming a committee to oversee marine oil spill prevention. I will also serve on this committee, called the Oil Spill Prevention and Advisory Committee

Water diversion defeated: We successfully fought back Senate Bill 5526, which would have allowed cities to divert up to 10 percent of water from certain rivers without a water use permit, without studying the potential adverse impacts of taking the water, and without a plan to return water or put into place an environmentally sound trade off. One expert speculated that this could potentially cause a 30 percent reduction in flows to Lake Union.



Rep. Cooper makes a point during a committee hearing.

Energy deregulation: We'll study and wait

This session, several major industrial interests pushed for rapid deregulation of our state's electrical energy industry. As a member of the House Energy and Utilities Committee, I worked to slow the pace of power deregulation because it could hurt residential consumers, our

environment, and the reliability of our power system.

We in Washington state enjoy the nation's cheapest, cleanest power. While deregulation may have reduced costs in some industries, there's nowhere for our rates to go but up. That's why I supported HB 2232, which would have called for a comprehensive study of what deregulation could mean to us. Although the bill was killed in committee, the chair of the committee has agreed that we will study the issue during the interim. I'll be at the table to make sure *our* interests are kept in mind.



Rep. Mike Cooper

21st District

Insurance Industry Deregulation

I strongly opposed **HB 2018**, the “Consumer Assistance and Insurance Market Stabilization Act,” arguing that it could impede access to affordable health-care insurance for working families at a time when the cost of health insurance is often a working family’s third-highest expense. Supporters argued the measure was needed to stabilize the individual insurance market and improve consumer choice.

Gov. Locke vetoed the bulk of **HB 2018**, while preserving changes that could lower premiums and provide maternity benefits in the state’s high-risk pool, and standards for emergency room care.

Tax cuts were on the agenda this year

B&O taxes: This year I supported SB 1821, which rolls back B&O service taxes to pre-1993 levels. I would have preferred to pass HB 1218, a bill that targeted the bulk of B&O tax cuts to small businesses. HB 1218 would have provided a tax credit (in addition to the existing \$420 small-business B&O credit) equal to the smaller of \$2,520 per year or 40 percent of due taxes for small service businesses. Unfortunately, this bill did not come up for a vote.

Property tax relief: The debate over property tax relief was one of how much and to whom. I supported a Democratic plan that would have granted a \$205 per year tax credit to homeowners. The bill that passed grants only about \$18 per year to the average homeowner, subject to a vote of the people on the November ballot.

Transportation — for now and the future

This session we passed a transportation budget that provides no funds for new construction projects, such as interchanges, HOV lanes, and widening projects. Projects underway will be completed. We need a transportation plan that takes seriously our need to:

- Preserve and repair the roads we now have;
- Plan and build new roads and highways to handle current and future needs;
- Increase the size and efficiency of our ferry fleet;
- Modernize our heavy rail capabilities; and
- Get serious about mass transit and inter-city rapid transit.

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